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There is Hope for TBI Recovery

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Eighty five percent of TBIs are considered mild and individuals can expect to fully recover and return to their job or school. Most patients recover within weeks.

Traumatic brain injuries have come to the forefront of service members minds as medical facilities look for innovative ways to treat what they cannot see. The Naval Hospital Camp Lejeune, Intrepid Spirit Concussion Recovery Center, whose mission is to provide state of the art precision brain injury recovery medical care to operational forces with a primary focus of rapid return to unrestricted duty, is leading the way in this venture with a 90 percent return to full duty rate. Recovery is possible.

“The sooner treatment is started the sooner the patient can begin to move forward. It is always better to start treatment earlier rather than later so that an individual can feel better and not suffer with lingering symptoms, such as chronic headaches or sleep disturbance,” said Suzanne G. Martin, a senior scientist and clinical psychologist with Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center. “By delaying treatment, the patient may experience relationship and work stress because of untreated symptoms.”

The first step in the recovery process is a detailed history, physical evaluation and assessment of current symptoms. The Naval Hospital Camp Lejeune Intrepid Spirit uses a team working with the service member and their family to develop a treatment plan that will return the service member to the highest possible level of function in their work, home, family, and community. Treatment will be guided by the presenting symptoms and the patient’s treatment goals such as improving sleep; reducing headache frequency or intensity.

“An individual physical body doesn’t exist separate from their mind and spirit. A holistic approach recognizes the need to treat the whole person and not simply symptoms,” said Martin. “The goal of a holistic healing approach is optimal health and wellness for the person.”

Martin explained that in most cases full recovery can be accomplished.

“The good news is that 85 percent of TBIs are considered mild and individuals can expect to fully recover and return to their job or school. Most patients recover within weeks,” said Martin, who explained that addictions or other psychological issues independent of the TBI such as PTSD or depression could slow down the healing process. “Also chronic pain from other injuries may slow recovery.”

In order to heal, Martin explains that it is important to stimulate brain connections.

“Part of rehabilitation is aimed at trying to ‘re-wire’ connections among the nerve cells — or neurons. This ‘re-wiring’ can make it possible for a function previously managed by a damaged area to be taken over by another undamaged area,” she said.

Often referred to as the plastic brain, researchers have found that the brain continues to make new connections from birth to death.

“Of course the brain is not actually plastic but you may hear people refer to “neuroplasticity” of the brain that basically is recognition of the brain’s ability to change by forming new neuronal connections throughout life and allows brain cells to compensate for injury to the brain,” said Martin. “Neuroplasticity continues throughout life and doesn’t stop at a certain age. Every time you learn something new you are building new neural connections. Neuroplasticity is the capacity of the brain to change with learning.”

This ever changing, ever learning brain concept is critical for TBI patients who are encouraged to learn new things in order to ensure recovery.

“Neuroplasticity enables the cognitive and physical rehabilitation process following a brain injury. The goal of rehabilitation is to stimulate the brain to recreate lost connections,” said Martin.

By challenging the brain to learn new things, the individual is helping to heal their brain.

“There is nothing preventing an adult brain from learning a new skill or developing a new ability. Actually it’s a good idea,” said Martin.

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